

Q: Good afternoon. This is December 6th, 2018. My name is Dorothea Black, and I'm here at Newton Free Library with Carl Carlsen, who is here to speak about the experiences of his father, Ivar Carlo Carlsen. Together we are participating in the Newton Talks oral history project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. So, hello! It's--thank you for being here today with these really remarkable stories of your father's.

A: Thank you for having me. I really appreciate it.

Q: He was a resident at the Scandinavian Living Center in Newton. How long was he there, do you know the years roughly?

A: Yeah. He came in there in 2001. At that time it had been enlarged and transformed from what was formerly the Swedish Home. And in its larger incarnation, my dad moved in and got what I would call "the captain's quarters," that is to say, he got a place in the old home, but with high ceilings, very spacious. It was really--we thought--the best apartment there. And he loved being there.

Q: He was there for a long time?

A: He was there from--until 2017, when he had to--he needed really--he had to go to a nursing home. So...

Q: And how old was he then?

A: Uh....97.

Q: Wow. Yeah.

A: So. You know. He had a good run.

Q: So, let's start at the beginning. When and where was he born?

A: He was born in 1919 in a city town called Sandefjord in Norway. It's about an hour or so south of Oslo. Sandefjord has--historically has been a great whaling town, a great seafaring town. And internet sources tell me that between 1920 and 1940, whaling was really booming in Sandefjord, and that was really the time of my father's youth. So the *Endurance*, you may know Shackelford's ship, was built in Sandefjord. The remake of Kon-Tiki, the story of Thor Heyerdahl's raft boat--boating across the Pacific--the remake of that film recently was made by two guys from Sandefjord. So there's a real strong seafaring tradition in Sandefjord that my father was really a part of.

Q: So going to sea was an obvious choice for him. Did he ever talk to you about why, though, he made that choice? And he was very young, wasn't he?

A: Yeah. I think there were a couple of reasons. First, it was really the thing to do. Most people--many people in Sandefjord had seafaring-related jobs. And the story that I think my father really didn't like to tell was as a young man--maybe 15 or 16--his father asked him to go get the newspaper. He refused. His father went to get the paper on a bike and was involved in an accident and died, and I think my father was--basically felt ashamed. And I think that helped him leave town. He never really told it to me that way, you know. I've kind of put it together, that's my little narrative. But he did leave as a very young man, and sailed initially down from Norway to the South Atlantic--we know it as Antarctica--on what were called whaling factory ships. And those were sort of pioneered in the Sandefjord shipyards, and they were--as the name implies--large ships which caught and processed whales. And they would be gone from fall until spring.

Q: So he was far away from--do you know if he kept in touch with his family and the community in Norway?

A: Uh...when he was on the whaling ship in the South Atlantic? I'm not sure how he would have. I don't know. I don't know.

Q: What was his position on the ship?

A: Well, he writes about it. He tells--he told me he was one of the guys who worked with the anchor and the chain for the anchor. So he was I guess a laborer. And it seems to me working with the chain and the anchor was probably among the lesser desirable jobs, you know. So that's...but I think that slaked his thirst for the sea. And the next ship that he was on--I have a picture of it. It was called the *Thorshovdi*. And that was a ship that was new. And it was a ship that he I think long held a very fond regard for. One reason is because it was new, and the second reason was because after he had been on it, it was blown up and came apart in two pieces. And after the war, they put the two pieces back together again and the ship sailed on. A lot of the ships that he had been on had--you know, were sunk or helped rescue survivors of other sunken ships. In his--he told me you'd have to be stupid to think this kind of work wasn't dangerous, and by that I mean Merchant Marine work during World War II.

Q: So he seems to have adapted really well to life at sea, and he had an interesting role in the war. But before we talk about that, are there any other memorable things about his early days? Did he need to work himself up through the ranks as a young man?

A: Yeah. Yeah. He told me about the various positions that you go through. And I think he really was committed to a life at sea, partially I think because of the culture of seafaring in Sandefjord, and partially because I think he thought--you know, he didn't really want to go home.

Q: And it must have been exciting going all over the world.

A: Yeah. Yeah. There are a lot of places that he named, ports that he was in. I can't name them--one, Balikpapan, in Borneo. And there are other places that if I were to name them, they would be unfamiliar and they would sound exotic. And he spent after the war a lot of time in the South Pacific on an army transport vessel, kind of similar to the one that--you remember that movie *Mister Roberts* with Henry Fonda and James Cagney was the captain. My father was a captain on a similar kind of ship, although I don't think he was quite the authoritarian that James Cagney portrayed in that movie.

Q: Well, in 1940 when Norway was invaded by the Germans, where was your father at that point?

A: He was on board a ship, and he remembers--and I've captured his recollection of it--I can't tell you more than that off the top of my head, but what happened as you may know was that the government created a kind of corporation called Nordstrand, if I have that right, and that--it was headquartered in New York--and that oversaw the Norwegian Merchant Marine during World War II. So they were, you know, a kind of separate entity, foreign-based, but considered to be Norwegian.

Q: So he couldn't go back to Norway during that time?

A: Probably not. He never really gave me the impression that he wanted to. You know, he was really, I think, concerned about working his way up the ladder to captain. And I think also he became interested in gaining US citizenship through service with the US Armed Forces.

Q: Do you know why, out of all the places in the world he'd been, he was interested in the United States?

A: Brooklyn. Brooklyn was really--at the risk of misstatement, Brooklyn was the second largest Norwegian city outside of Oslo. That's probably an exaggeration. But Brooklyn was where he stayed during layovers. Brooklyn was where--after he retired and we lived in New Jersey, he would go to Brooklyn frequently to Norwegian stores and also to meetings of the Norwegian War Sailors Club. So...I would say Brooklyn.

Q: And so during the early part of the war, he was working on Norwegian ships, but just headquartered in New York. And then he got more involved in the war effort. What was his next step?

A: Well then he was actually on an American ship, and that was the one that was sunk off the coast of Madagascar. And that--

Q: When he was on it.

A: When he was on it. Right.

Q: Tell about that.

A: Well, can I read you two pages from--three pages, maybe? Would you mind?

Q: No. And could you--when you--maybe you should tell us a little bit about your project with your father: how you went about it. Did you record him?

A: No. No. He was very skeptical. When I had done my first oral history project years before, I was really stumped and he--I asked to do his story, and he said no. He thought--well, he thought I was trying to take the easy way out. So you know, I approached him with--you know, gently. And what I did essentially was to talk with him for maybe 20 minutes at a sitting, and then go home. I would take notes, I would write it up, and then I'd come back. Sometimes I'd read it back to him, sometimes I'd say "Dad, you know, you told me about this last time. I have a question for you." And we just kept at it for a year or two. I don't really--I can't pin down the timeframe more than that.

Q: So, short conversations--

A: Short conversations, note taking, writing it up. And of course to me the capturing of the voice and the nuances of personality is really important, so...you know, I tried to do that, and I felt that

since I knew him so well, I could get by without the tape recorder. And that saved me the work of trying to transcribe it word for word. It worked. It worked that way.

Q: And his memory seems to have been excellent. Do you think he enjoyed it after a while?

A: Yeah. After a while, I think he was kind of flattered that I was so interested and kept that interest up. And we started out with a map of the world, and I said, you know, "Tell me about your favorite voyages." And from there, it never--your seven favorite--I was thinking the seven voyages of Sinbad or something. But then it just morphed into telling about his experiences on specific ships. And then that kind of led to my trying to arrange his comments chronologically, and you know, it just kind of grew--I would hesitate to say organically, but it just--you know, I just kept at it. And after a while I think bought into it and went along and was kind of happy we had something to do.

Q: Well tell us about the--being torpedoed.

A: Well this is what I wrote down of what he told me. So two-thirds of it is the story and then in the end, he says--sort of at the end, after I thought we were done, he says, "Oh, and by the way, I've gotta tell you this." So he was a guy who I had been trying to--this is a long introduction--I'd been trying to figure out definitively which Norwegian ships he was on and during what time period, what American Army transport ships he was on. And one day he says, "Hey, you know, see that suitcase up there above the--I want to throw it out. Why don't you throw it out." And I open it up, and inside--you're laughing because I think you know the story ends by my saying,

"Here are the two documents that provide those details that I've been going mad"--I wouldn't say going crazy about, but very concerned about. So this is what he has to say. The ship was called the *Sebastian Cermeno*. And I hope I can--

"It was 1943 and I was working for the Army Transport. I was in Sydney on a ship owned by an Asian company under the management of Burns Phillip. I started delivering provisions, war materiel, up and down the East coast of Australia from Sydney to Brisbane, Townsville, Cairns, Cooktown and even Port Rhodes, just a place where troops were training. We went to New Guinea, to Port Moresby, and there the big story was about the only snow plow in town. A Liberty ship had come into port and they needed space on the ship, so they took the snow plow off and put it in the back someplace.

I was first mate and I was trying to get my citizen's papers, and I asked to get a job going to the States. And I got on the *Sebastian Cermeno*, which wasn't going directly to the States, but first to Suez to discharge cargo--war materiel at Port Tewfik. There we got an order to go to Rio to pick up coffee and we stopped in Mombasa, Kenya for repairs in the engine room.

Heading around Madagascar there was a strong Southern current. Several hundred miles out of Madagascar, a few hundred miles east of Madagascar, we were hit by a torpedo that made a surprising, funny sound--more of a whoosh--in the water. The ship was empty and it hit in the back in the bunker tank. Sea water filled in quick and the ship stood up and up and up, almost straight up, and then it went down. She had 75 crew and a gun crew--a big gun crew.

We were the last lifeboat out. We were eleven men and one died the next day. He was in the engine room and had been burnt badly by the steam. We had sail so we kept sailing. The boat had room for 38; that was its capacity. A few guys huddled in front underneath the canvas. It was all American boys; they all spoke English. I was the only foreign man on board the *Sebastian Cermeno*.

The funny part was we were out 19 days and there was enough food. Nobody was hungry or thirsty. In the lifeboat you sat most of the time. It was 39 foot long so you had room. You didn't go no place to sleep. You sat until you got tired and then you fell asleep.

Using good judgement, I sailed us west, aiming for Madagascar, steering Northwest all the time to make up for the current. We sailed and sailed and didn't see no land, only the lighthouse on the southern tip, so I knew damn well we missed it. Navigating, guessing, steering by star and the planet Jupiter, we headed for Durban.

Close to Durban, an airplane came over us and shouted there was a rescue ship ahead. I was sorry. In ten years--ten hours, excuse me--we could have sailed into the harbor. We ended up 12 miles out being picked up by an Australian destroyer, the *Quickmatch*. But they couldn't take us into port because it was closed at night, blacked out, sealed, with destroyers patrolling back and forth.

The next day, they took us to Durban, and the American consul took care of us. We were in a hospital for a few days and then sent by train across South Africa to Cape Town, where we awaited passage to the States. Somebody told me the lifeboat had been used for gunnery practice.

The ship, the *George W. Goethals*, took us to New York, where I was discharged and I could work toward getting my citizen papers. But the Norwegian government wouldn't let me sail on any American ships."

And just--there's a note, it was 1250 miles from where the ship went down to Durban.

Q: So he navigated that lifeboat 1200--

A: Right, 1200--he missed Madagascar, but he got Africa.

Q: I think you captured his voice.

A: Well, thank you. So this, as I said, this is what he tells me as the project is wrapping up.

"Oh, and by the way. I didn't tell you this before, but it's something I've been thinking about lately, that is--while the ship, the *Sebastian Cermeno*, was sinking, this man who was a fireman was coming out of the door from the engine room onto the boat deck, and he collapsed there. So, when I saw him, I began crawling up on the sloping deck 'til I got up to him, and I dragged him toward the number four lifeboat which was being launched. When we got close to the side of the

ship, I got him on my shoulder and was able to carry him down the ladder to the lifeboat which was full of oil and water. I stepped into the boat and slid him down off my back and into the boat and then I got into the boat too. The other guys in the boat dragged him away and got him up on top of the motor case, where he died. The boat had a motor and we tried and tried, but couldn't get it started. John, the fireman I had dragged down, was hurt by the explosion in the engine room and he died in the lifeboat that night.

All the water in the boat was covered by oil spilled from the ship's bunkers. It was above our knees. We bailed it out that day and the next day. We had a bucket to bail it out and eventually we did. We had a bilge pump and that helped, but a guy with a bucket is much faster. All the lifeboats had floating tanks from fore to aft to keep them afloat. These were empty tanks built in underneath the seats to ensure buoyancy. Some boats I heard about were filled with kapok, which is a floating material in case the floating tanks are hit with a bullet and fill with water. I have a Coast Guard book in the bookcase all about lifeboats."

Q: You must be very proud of him. So he was in Army transport--

A: Army transport, which is an arm of the Army, which in the '90's, in the early '90's, was finally--his service was finally considered to make him eligible for veterans' benefits. So they weren't initially for the 35 years considered war veterans, so to speak.

Q: And you mentioned that all this work was very dangerous. Do you have a sense of just how dangerous?

A: Well, he could be--obviously could be torpedoed at anytime. You know, it's not like going sailing on a sailboat in the Charles River. You're in the big ocean and there are U-boats around, and you are their prey.

Q: And there were many casualties.

A: There were many casualties. And what I discovered over--through the internet, was that many of the ships as I mentioned before--many of the ships that he had been on were either sunk or picked up casualties from other boats that had sunk. The captain of the *Sebastian Cermeno* survived. He went and captained another boat. That boat was torpedoed, and he died. There were--the casualty rates for the Merchant Marine during World War II were extraordinarily high. The estimates for the Norwegian Merchant Marines was two out of every 15 died. The estimates for all of the Merchant Mariners--American, excuse me--one in every 26. So it was extraordinarily dangerous, as those statistics that I gleaned from the internet show.

Q: What was Army transport doing--what was their job during the war and right after the war?

A: Well, my father was really in there after the war. So he was headquartered in the South Pacific, or the Southwest Pacific. And he really had two--they had two primary functions. One, they went around collecting bodies. And the collection of bodies was kind of new to the 20th century. He also went around collecting war materiel that was no longer needed. He has a little clock that he got that was part of the--one story that he told was that in Japan, but they were just

driving Jeeps off a cliff, because it was cheaper than loading them into a ship and bringing them home. That sounded--well it sounded from a folklorist point of view like a great story. And I was able to find, believe it or not, an article in Time Magazine that verified that this was actually done. So you know, that was--and as I may have mentioned to you, he was on a relatively small ship. He was a captain. He was very happy to have his own ship. But it was like--the ship was sort of like the ship in *Mister Roberts*, the movie. Not because of the dysfunction of the captain and the crew, but just because of the size of the ship and their--they weren't really involved in combat. There was nothing really glorious about what they were doing, although I suppose collecting bodies to be returned to families is a really important thing.

Q: Do you know how many boats he was captain of?

A: Yeah. About five or six.

Q: And then after the post-war activities of Army transport, what happened next?

A: Well, he met my mother in Manila. And--you know, I used to think when I was a little kid, the war was over and they came from Manila to New York, as if they got on a ferry. But it really took them until 1950 to get to New York.

Q: When did they meet?

A: They met--they married in 1948. So--and my mother was a refugee from Hitler's Germany. So they must have met in '47--I don't really know. But they moved and then my mother's--her other, her siblings, everybody moved to Queens. Everybody moved to Jackson Heights. And then my father, on the day that I was born, got a job on an oil tanker for Gulf Oil. And he sailed with Gulf Oil for about 32 years, 33 years.

Q: When were you born?

A: November 27th, 1950.

Q: And where did the family live?

A: We lived in Jackson Heights, in Queens, New York City.

Q: All the time that you grew up?

A: Yeah. Well, then when I was about eight or nine, my parents moved me to New Jersey, so I could have a privileged upbringing like people do here in Newton, as opposed to living in Jackson Heights, where trees are things that grow in the squares that are unconcretized on the sidewalk.

Q: And when did your father become a citizen, a US citizen?

A: 1950.

Q: So for 32 years he worked for Gulf. And what was it like having a father away at sea so often?

A: Well, it was--he was--initially, he was home maybe a quarter to a third of the year. So when he came home it was a big holiday. You know, he was a lot more easygoing than my mom, and so--but I was kind of used to it. I didn't really think "This is strange," I thought "This is what it is."

Q: It sounds like you were close.

A: Yeah. Well, as close as you can get to a reserved Norwegian. I mean, we grew much closer after he moved into the Scandinavian Living Center. And doing this project together really drew us close, so.

Q: When you were growing up, when you were young, did he ever talk about his experiences at sea, or during the war?

A: I think he may have mentioned that he was on a ship that was sunk. I knew that. But I didn't really know many more of the details. He would always talk about the ship. For him, the phrase "the ship" signified both the individual ship that he was on at the time and the ships that he had sailed on in general. So that was--in his conversation he would always make references to things

that happened on board "the ship." But I guess you make me want to say, too, from a historical point of view, he was--he sailed on tankers for Gulf Oil that were called T2 tankers. And they were tankers that were built subsequent to World War II, and were really part of the fleet that was developed in order to move oil around. So he was really part of--if you can call it the technology of shipping oil--he was part of a very specific period. Some of these tankers were what they called jumboized, where they would cut them apart and insert a new piece in the middle to make them bigger. But I think today, many people when they think of tankers, they think of the jumbo tankers, huge tankers. And he really--his time was before that.

Q: Did he have any adjustment becoming a citizen and making this change in his work? Did he ever talk about that?

A: No, I don't think so. I think he was used to being at sea. I think he really--you know, I've been thinking a lot about happy places recently. And I think his happy place was at sea. On my way over here I passed by the Charles River near the Scandinavian, which he liked to go to. There was a little--behind Shaw's Market, sort of in Waltham, there's like a little parking lot and a little bridge over the river. And he would love to go there and just kind of sit and be by the water. So I think for him just to be at sea and to be--you know I asked him one time, I thought--you know, as an English major, I thought, "Oh, he must think the water is beautiful. He must feel a great bond with the water." But no, he said, "You know, the water, you know, it changes colors." But he really thought of his job as--the captain's job is to keep the ship stable. And that kind of surprised me. I was hoping for a more romantic answer. But on the bottom line, that is the absolute truth. The captain's job is to keep the ship stable. And I think he really felt a duty and an obligation to

that. And I think it perhaps was borne out in the way that he was able to captain that lifeboat and navigate it and bring it into Durban, so that, with the exception of the wounded seaman, everyone survived.

Q: He seemed to take tremendous pride in his work. He must have had to retire at some point.

A: Yeah. Yeah. I think he retired...you know, he didn't like being a land-lover as much as he liked being at sea. He went back for one last trip a few years after he retired, but our mother was--my mother was--really needed him at home. And I prevailed on him to--and I think it was hard for him. But he did it without problem. So...and then as I said, he would go to Brooklyn, he would--there was a Norwegian war sailors monument in Battery Park in Manhattan. Every 8th of May he would go there and gather with the war sailors, and they would sing the national anthem. They would drink coffee. And he was really committed to that, let's say.

Q: What brought him to Newton?

A: Well, my mom died in '99, and my dad--my parents were living at the Granada Highlands in Malden, and my dad in the year 2000 was doing okay. And then in 2001, I noticed that he just seemed to be a little less interested in shopping and making food for himself. And I started looking around for places for him to live, and the Scandinavian Living Center seemed to be a good fit. And I took him there, and there we met a guy named Tore Dahl, who was very involved with the--he didn't live there at that time, but Tore Dahl was a war sailor, just like my father. I thought "Wow, this is great! He could have a pal!" And--but you know, he's a very stubborn guy.

"No, no, no, no, no." I repeatedly would urge him to move. "No, no, no." And finally I just said "Forget it. I don't care what you do." And then he said, "Oh, I think I'd like to move there."

[Laughter] And interestingly, I had coffee last week with a guy named Hans Christensen, and he was--he's involved with the Scandinavian Living Center, the Scandinavian Charitable Foundation--and Hans was telling me how he kind of got friendly with my dad, and told a different story of how he came to be at the Scandinavian Living Center--that Hans brought him around, introduced him the executive director Joe Carella, and then when it was time, he made the decision. So I said to Hans, "This is great. We have parallel stories, and probably the real truth is some combination of the two." But...

Q: So it sounds like during his time in Newton there were other Scandinavians, other war--other veterans. Any other sailors?

A: Yeah. There were--every May 8th at the Scandinavian they would have a commemorative luncheon honoring the war sailors, and Tore Dahl and my dad were there. I think there were others. I know there was a woman, and I'm not exactly sure what her connection was, but she passed away recently. And I think there's no one left to have that lunch. It was a dwindling number. But they really--and I think that was important for my dad, that he was at a place where they recognized, they celebrated his being a war sailor.

Q: I think we have to start wrapping up pretty soon, but just one more question: He was really a man of action, but it sounds like through this process of writing down his memories, maybe did he have some time for reflection on his life? Do you think that there was anything in particular

he wanted you to know about himself or any insights he had onto what his life experience added up to?

A: He was--you know, if--let's agree to call him a man of action, so--that he was less a man of reflection, that he really--he would--I think he would pooh-pooh that kind of stuff. But I've been thinking a lot about his memory recently. I--a friend of mine recommended a book by Wendell Berry, the Kentucky poet and fiction writer and essayist, called "The Memory of Old Jack." And the book is really about Old Jack's life and how at the end of his life, things prompt him to remember certain things. Then he dies, and then the membership of the community that he lived in are left with his memory. And so the book is not only, it seems to me, about Jack's remembering, but the way his memory, the residue of his life--bad word--is kept alive through his memory.

So for me now, it's not so much of what he thought about his life, but it's his memory that I'm trying to keep alive--to keep alive through being here and telling you about it, keep alive through depositing this manuscript at other Scandinavian archives that are interested in it. And my wife and daughter and I are going to Norway in May, and one of the things that I've been grappling with is what hotel do we stay at. We have nobody to tell us. But then Hans Christensen says, "Well, you know, I always try to stay at a hotel on the water." And for our trip, we're taking boat rides through the fjords, a boat ride from Oslo to Copenhagen, kind of in memory in a way of my father's relationship to the sea. So then I got home and I said to my wife, "Bing!" You know, "This is it! This is the principle from which we can decide what hotels to stay at." And--because--in the memory of my dad and his relationship to the sea.

So to me it's less about interpreting his life or the way he would interpret his life, but it's about the use of the memory and the way the memory survives, and again, the uses to which the living put it. And I guess really that's what the oral history project here is involved, it's the uses of the memories that are shared.

Q: That's right. And well, thank you for sharing these wonderful memories. I think anyone who hears this will wish that they could have known your dad. So thank you very much for coming. We're really happy to be able to include you in the Newton oral history project.

A: I'm delighted. Thank you so much.

END OF INTERVIEW